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Combating defamation of religions

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 60/150. The report provides an overview of reports relevant to the issue of defamation of religions, and promotion of tolerance for all religions and their value systems by the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

* A/61/150.
** The present report was submitted after the deadline owing to consultations.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 60/150 of 16 December 2005, entitled "Combating defamation of religions," the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the implementation of that resolution to the Assembly at its sixty-first session.

2. In reply to this request, the present report refers to the contents of reports relevant to the theme of defamation of religions and the promotion of tolerance for all religions and their value systems by the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

3. The reports referred to were submitted to the Commission on Human Rights at its sixty-second session and are now before the Human Rights Council (which has assumed the functions of the Commission following the adoption of General Assembly resolution 60/251 of 15 March 2006) and may be examined by the Council at its second session (18 September to 6 October 2006).

4. Considering that several reports relevant to the theme of defamation of religions will be placed before the Human Rights Council for review, the present report provides an overview of the contents of the reports already submitted and on which the Council could issue decisions or submit resolutions to the General Assembly.

II. Overview of the reports submitted by the Special Rapporteurs

5. The report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance entitled "Situation of Muslims and Arab peoples in various parts of the world" (E/CN.4/2006/17) was submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/3. The resolution requested the Special Rapporteur to examine the situation of Muslims and Arab peoples in various parts of the world, the discrimination faced by them with regard to access to justice, political participation, respect for cultures, physical assaults and attacks against their places of worship, cultural centres, businesses and properties in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 and also to report on his findings to the Commission at its sixty-second session, and make recommendations to improve the situation.

6. The report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (E/CN.4/2006/5 and Add.1-4) was submitted pursuant to resolution 2005/40 of the Commission on Human Rights. The Special Rapporteur has been monitoring and encouraging compliance with the provisions of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief since the creation of the mandate in 1986. The report submitted to the Commission sets out the activities that have been carried out under the mandate since the submission of the last report to the Commission.

7. In addition, by its decision 1/107 of 29 June 2006, the Human Rights Council requested Asma Jahangir, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,

and Doudou Diène, the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, as well as the High Commissioner to report to its next session on the "increasing trend of defamation of religions, incitement to racial and religious hatred and its recent manifestations ... in particular its implications for article 20, paragraph 2, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights". The report of the Special Rapporteurs and that of the High Commissioner will be submitted to the Human Rights Council at its second session.

III. Overview of the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

8. The report of the High Commissioner entitled "Combating defamation of religions" (E/CN.4/2006/12) focuses on activities undertaken by States, the Office of the High Commissioner, human rights mechanisms and the United Nations system that aim at promoting dialogue among civilizations and religious tolerance.

A. General overview

9. The Office of the High Commissioner received replies from 13 Member States to a note verbale dated 9 May 2005, inviting the latter to forward their contributions for the report of the High Commissioner on actions undertaken and measures adopted aimed at countering religious intolerance and supporting and promoting a culture of peace and tolerance based on respect for human rights and religious diversity.

10. The Office of the High Commissioner continues to pursue efforts to develop relations with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Islamic Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). In this respect, the High Commissioner signed a memorandum of understanding with ISESCO in November 2005. This memorandum of understanding sets out a framework for cooperation in various areas, including the field of human rights education, the exchange and dissemination of human rights information and the joint organization of conferences and training courses. The Office of the High Commissioner is also in the process of concluding a wider memorandum of understanding with OIC regarding a comprehensive approach to collaboration between the two organizations.

11. Regarding the letters received by the Office of the High Commissioner in which concerns were expressed about the 30 September 2005 cultural edition of the *Jyllands Posten*, a Danish newspaper, the High Commissioner expressed the view that there was a need to explore ways and means to adequately address the issue of religious intolerance by striking the right balance between freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

12. The report of the High Commissioner outlines numerous activities, including the organization by the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination of two complementary events: a thematic discussion on the prevention of genocide held on 28 February 2005, and a general debate on multiculturalism on 8 March 2005.

B. The promotion and protection of cultural diversity

13. The Secretary-General in July 2005, announced the launch of an "Alliance of Civilizations" initiative, intended to respond to the need for a committed effort by the international community — both at the institutional and civil society levels — to bridge the gaps between Islamic and Western societies and overcome prejudices, misconceptions and polarization.

14. On 16 November 2005, the United Nations marked the annual International Day for Tolerance with a call for cultures to learn about each other. In a message marking the day, the Secretary-General stressed the importance of individual initiative in building a culture of tolerance, in addition to increased legal protection and education.

15. The promotion of dialogue in the service of peace is one of the main concerns of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). As such, many activities currently pursued within the regular programme of UNESCO respond in concrete terms to the exigencies of instilling and sustaining a concrete dialogue among peoples. On 20 October 2005, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, an international normative instrument that will enter into force three months after its ratification by 30 States. The Convention seeks to reaffirm the links between culture, development and dialogue and to create an innovative platform for international cultural cooperation.

C. The role of education

16. Human rights education, as defined in international instruments, aims at sharing knowledge and developing skills and attitudes towards building a universal culture of human rights. Accordingly, it contributes to fostering respect for and appreciation of differences, as well as of opposition to discrimination, on the basis of several grounds, including religion. To boost related efforts in all sectors, in December 2004 the General Assembly proclaimed the World Programme for Human Rights Education. Its first phase (2005-2007) is specifically dedicated to the integration of human rights education into the primary and secondary school systems, and a related Plan of Action was adopted by United Nations Member States in July 2005. The Plan of Action focuses on action to be undertaken at the national level in terms of planning, implementing and evaluating human rights education in the national school systems. Information on activities by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in support of those efforts is provided in the High Commissioner's report (E/CN.4/2006/90) on the World Programme.

17. The report of the regional seminar for South and South-East Asia on "Combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance: role of education", held in Bangkok from 19 to 21 September 2005 (E/CN.4/2006/22), discussed issues related to the contribution of education as a tool for advocating respect and inclusion through a multicultural approach in contents of school curricula and materials.

IV. Conclusion

18. **The steps taken as summarized above are indicative of a will on the part of Member States, the United Nations system and the wider international community to counter religious intolerance. Continuous reporting on allegations of incidents involving intolerance and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief indicate that much more needs to be done.**